

In the Line of Fire: A Memoir by Pervez Musharraf. Free Press, 2006, 368 pp., \$28.00.

Gen Pervez Musharraf: despot or redeemer? This question is pondered by many interested in the leader of a country that is emerging as a power to be reckoned with. Musharraf decided to write this autobiography after Pakistan assumed a starring role in the war on terrorism—his “contribution to the history of our era.” The memoir offers a kaleidoscopic perspective of one of the most contentious leaders of today. *In the Line of Fire* addresses everything from Musharraf’s pioneer train ride into the birth of the nation-state Pakistan at the age of “4 years and 3 months” to the armor-plated transportation of a controversial world figure. It includes a prophetic foreword by Musharraf, six simple yet thoroughly composed parts, a 14-page pictography, and a reflective epilogue.

Musharraf starts his memoir with the unveiling of a child who prances into a newly formed Pakistan with the energy and cheek of a wild mustang. He relates captivating anecdotes and memories of the blurred boundaries of childhood between India, Pakistan, and Turkey. Musharraf gives the reader a view of a young child with a keen sense of power of discrimination between the weak and the strong. Early on, the mystical force that is luck seems to form a lasting relationship with Musharraf. His was a childhood spent immersed in love, adventure, and controversy. He brings his complex personality alive, detailing the transformation from a reluctant student into an enlightened leader of a country that he feels has always been his home.

As the pages unfold, Musharraf alludes to a successful life built without compromise of faith, family, or dreams. He carefully explores the chance occurrences that were influential in his life and the career choices he made. Fueled by a childhood of mischief, Musharraf sought distraction in the military ranks, where he found his harmony. The section entitled “Life in the Army” recreates the molding of a soldier whose preparation through fire would be useful in readying him for the tempests to come.

The more Musharraf engaged with the military, the more meaningful the dance became. He relates how he valued the education gained in his formative Army years; valued the many ways he was inoculated against the stress of battle. In his stories, he fancies himself as a connoisseur of military strategy. The events Musharraf shares display his strength of character that readily mocks the face of adversity and enables him to fight and lead another day.

Several appropriately named chapters—“The Hijacking,” “The Conspiracy,” “The Countercoup,” and “Anatomy of Suicide”—relate the dramatics surrounding assassination attempts, coups, and manhunts. Safely from within the eye of the storm, Musharraf shares the spin-off tornadoes of his life through detailed, catastrophic stories. He tries to unravel the mystery, mapping, and transformation of his life and his country. There are tales of esprit de corps (some in sweeping generalizations) and how he faces the essential ambiguity of leadership—the freedom and solitude that comes with power.

Musharraf devotes an entire chapter to the Kargil conflict. He illuminates his points in exacting detail, down to the miles and meters. Critics have chided Musharraf for spending so much time giving critical attention to the details of the incident, yet my take is that he goes to great length to present the 1999 conflict as not just a battle won or lost, but also as the event that catapulted him to leading the destiny of a nation. I believe all the extreme focus in the book is to help the reader better understand the events that have brought Pakistan and Musharraf to this time in history.

Musharraf's entry into the antiterrorism band plays like a tune written to avoid the vulnerability of friendly fire. He notes that Gen Colin Powell gave him the ultimatum, "You are either with us or against us." The procedural ride through the web of al-Qaeda suicide bombings and slaughters is both brutal and effective in presenting Musharraf as a dedicated leader pursuing an ingenious hive of terrorists. He adamantly denies Taliban operations within its borders and any feeding of the beasts of Mullah Omar and Osama bin Laden. He makes all valid attempts to aid the influence of a pro-Western persona and his hopes to promote a more liberal image.

Leaving no stone unturned throughout the chapters, Musharraf shares his concerns of economy and desired homogeneity of his country, all with the backdrop of a supportive wife, mother, and two children. The essential issues such as nuclear proliferation, international diplomacy, and the emancipation of women are addressed in such a way that sets the stage for future nation-state perspectives.

Musharraf takes a calculated risk in presenting his story, although it is a great way to have a captive audience. At times the book takes on the tone of an advertisement—an emotional campaign for political understanding—a bridge between the mind-set, the media, and reality. I was impressed by Musharraf's keen ability to plop me into the midst of a coup, yet to come out of the pages unscathed, much as Musharraf himself. Though in many areas Musharraf appears to have taken artistic license when presenting events, the book is an easy and occasionally quite entertaining read. Knowledge of the historical events surrounding the partition of British colonial India, modern-day Pakistan, and the cooperative relationship growing between terrorism and religion would be quite useful for the reader. This memoir should be required reading for anyone who wishes to better understand the power that is Pakistan. I must caution that this is a book written about, by, and for Musharraf—it is wise for readers to keep an open mind and to come to their own conclusions on the facts, figures, truths, and persons presented.